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**Evers’ building budget roadblocked by GOP**

By WisPolitics.com

There's the two-year budget plan that gets a lot of attention at the Capitol.

And then there's the capital budget, a document that centers on major building projects around the state at prisons, colleges and other institutions like State Fair Park in Milwaukee.

With Democrat Tony Evers in the governor's office and Republicans in control of the Legislature, the capital budget gets treated a lot like the much bigger state spending plan for the next two years. Republicans, saying it's too expensive, vow to trim it.

So for a third straight cycle under Evers, the state Building Commission deadlocked on his capital budget, sending the $3.8 billion document to the GOP-controlled Joint Finance Committee without a
recommendation on any projects.

As they did in 2019 and 2021, GOP members of the eight-person commission offered a motion to send the document to the Joint Finance Committee without a recommendation.

After that failed 4-4, the commission then went through each section of the capital budget. Again, the votes fell 4-4 with Republicans opposed to recommending anything Evers had proposed and Democrat members backing his calls.

There was no discussion ahead of the votes other than Sen. Joan Ballweg, R-Markesan, asking Evers if his Corrections Department planned to do a strategic plan of the agency’s physical needs.

Evers’ capital budget includes $25.1 million to construct a new 22,000-square-foot health services unit at the Green Bay Correctional Institution to meet the medical, dental, psychological and therapeutic
needs of inmates.

Republican lawmakers, particularly those in the Green Bay area, have been pushing to replace the prison, which began operation in 1898.

Ballweg and fellow GOP Sen. Andre Jacque, R-De Pere, questioned the wisdom of putting more state money into a facility that some argue has already outlived its usefulness.

“The proposed health services unit is going to continue to perpetuate use of that facility at a point when it is already beyond capacity and creating a health issue for our state employees as well as inmates at
that facility,” Jacque said.

Evers assured the committee DOC is looking at a comprehensive plan. He said the first piece is completing an overhaul of the juvenile justice system, which includes shutting down Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake in northern Wisconsin.

“Assuming that that will happen, they are working on more robust plans,” Evers said.

As the commission deadlocked on votes, Sen. Bob Wirch, D-Pleasant Prairie, tried to lighten the mood when the commission came to a section that included allocating $6.5 million in general fund supported borrowing to renovate the cream puff building at State Fair Park. The state has already enumerated $6 million in gifts for the project.

“Let’s vote for cream puffs,” Wirch urged.

“I love cream puffs, but no,” said state Rep. Rob Swearingen, R-Rhinelander, when it was his turn to vote.

GOP lawmakers have dramatically pared back Evers' first two capital budgets. In 2019, it reduced a $2.5 billion proposal to $1.8 billion. Two years ago, it cut a $2.4 billion proposal to about $1.6 billion.

The deadlocked vote four years ago was believed to be the first time the commission had sent the capital budget to the Finance Committee without a recommendation.

Evers in a statement accused Republicans of playing politics rather than having “a meaningful discussion about how these projects would serve the needs of the folks they represent.”

He vowed to continue fighting for the projects.

“Despite today’s unfortunate outcome, we will continue to fight for these projects as we work to invest in and build 21st-century infrastructure in.”

Ballweg, who also serves on the Finance Committee, told WisPolitics.com after the votes that GOP lawmakers were still discussing how much they’d like to spend on the capital budget and how
much of the funding should come from cash.

The state is projected to finish the current fiscal year with a more than $7 billion surplus, and Evers has proposed covering half of his $3.8 billion capital budget with cash rather than borrowing.

Evers has argued that approach would save the state $1 billion in debt payments over the next 20 years.

Ballweg said some Republicans are interested in the potential savings by using cash. Still, she also noted many of the projects are long-term. When buying a house, she said, people would typically use
the cash they have available for better curtains or a bigger down payment rather than trying to cover the whole cost.

“That’s a big part of the surplus that we have,” she said. “There are additional needs.”

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